Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

TESTIMONY OF JAMES A. DONOFRIO

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

RECREATIONAL FISHING ALLIANCE

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION,

WILDLIFE AND OCEANS

APRIL 28, 2000

Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Atlantic Striped Bass, an important and valuable recreational fish here in New Jersey and in all the coastal communities from Maine to North Carolina. My name is Jim Donofrio, and I am the executive director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA), a national 501c(c)(4) non-profit political action organization representing over 70,000 saltwater anglers and support industries through direct membership and club affiliation programs.

The Atlantic Striped Bass is an anadromous fish that frequents brackish waters and depends on a healthy estuarine ecosystem for its survival. As such, it is affected by non-point source pollution and habitat loss and degradation, more so than an offshore fish. Further, the Atlantic Striped Bass is highly sensitive to the predator-prey inter-relationship and the competition with other species for forage fish.

A primary food source for this species is menhaden. It has been reported that length and weight ratios for the Atlantic Striped Bass are below normal. Regional impacts of menhaden harvest in certain areas may be the cause. In fact, ornithologists studying ospreys have discovered that these birds, which traditionally count menhaden as a primary food source, are now substituting other fish species in their diet, such as weakfish and other game fish. This concerns us at RFA.

We applaud Chairman Saxton for being a leader in exploring the predator-prey relationship and in helping nudge the fisheries scientists in the right direction. Unfortunately, we need to continue to stress a holistic approach to fisheries research rather than what we are currently seeing, which is a species-by-species approach. We need direct science programs for the management of Atlantic Striped Bass. Stocks are more robust, causing an increase in biomass. Along with that increase comes the need for more food to sustain the population. Recreational and commercial fishermen recognize the inter-relationship and competition for a steady food source among summer flounder, bluefish and Atlantic Striped Bass, particularly in coastal areas. Now it is time for the scientists and managers to do the same.

There is a disconnect between the population and migration dynamics of Atlantic Striped Bass and the management of these fish. Although the EEZ is closed to the harvest of these fish, thanks to strong action taken by Chairman Saxton, we believe it is reckless to manage these fish with a three-mile arbitrary boundary. The scientific research of this fishery must exceed this boundary because the Atlantic Striped Bass frequently migrates 40 miles off the coast - yet, no mortality or abundance levels are being calculated in federal waters. We suggest that the reauthorization bill include a study to rectify this situation.

We also recommend that the fishery management councils and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission implement an observer program on commercial vessels that interact with Atlantic Striped bass in their directed fisheries, such as squid trawlers and mackerel seiners. Should the bycatch seem excessive, we would further recommend that a later authorization bill explore the option of time and area closures to reduce the mortality of Atlantic Striped Bass as bycatch.

In closing, RFA recommends that the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act remain separate from other authorizing legislation, that the science be expanded past the three-mile limit, that an observer program be established for other directed fisheries, and that the predator-prey relationship be carefully studied. We thank you for the opportunity to testify and look forward to working with the Subcommittee and you, Mr. Chairman, on this and other bills pending before Congress this year.

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